

“Working the Sturge”

by Stephen Forsythe



Biologists conducting research on “the Sturge” find that this fish can be quite a handful.

USFWS photos

“Pull nets? Sure!” I said to Gail Carmody, feigning a comprehension of her invitation. I had just arrived for a visit as part of my responsibilities as the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Florida State Supervisor when Gail, who supervises our Panama City Field Office, suggested I join one of her fisheries crews that was monitoring the status of the threatened Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*).

Soon I found myself floating down the lower Choctawhatchee River, about a mile from where it empties into the bay of the same name on the Gulf of Mexico coast in northwest Florida. I was accompanying Service biologist Frank Parauka and technician Bob Jarvis as they conducted their annual capture and tagging of the sturgeon on this mid-November day. The work was timed to coincide with the species’ migration from the river into the bay in

response to dropping winter temperatures. Also braving the chill and long hours was Student Conservation Association intern Karen Seiser. We were running a set of four nets several times a day and part of the night to capture and tag new sturgeon and to recapture previously tagged sturgeon. Frank had been studying sturgeons for 15 years.

The gently flowing cypress-lined river was about a half-mile wide where





we were. Our 18-foot (5.4-meter) flat-bottomed aluminum boat contained a holding tank for keeping the fish while we tagged them. It was also equipped with a hanging sling for weighing the large fish.

In late afternoon I saw my first critter, a relatively common-sized individual in the 80-pound (36-kilogram) range. Wait a minute...an 80-pound fish! I began to realize that I was going to have to *work*. Frank and Karen, with my amateur assistance, wrangled these monsters into the boat so we could measure and tag them, while Bob skillfully kept the boat positioned. We had to hoist the fish in and out of the holding tank and then onto the sling before lifting them gently over the gunwales to release them. Obviously, this was going to be no easy “show-me tour.”

As we worked on the river that cloudy afternoon and evening, a cold front swept chilly rain and wind upon us. At the last “pull” at about 8:30 p.m., it was pitch dark except for the blinking of the floating lights marking the nets. Still, by the time we extracted all 14 of the sturgeon (one nearly 100 pounds [45 kg] and 6 feet [2 m] long) from the nets, worked them up, and returned them to the river, I found myself nicely

warmed, even with the cold rain running down my back.

I was struck by the absolute enthusiasm that Frank and Bob exhibited with the capture of each fish. I supposed they had done this dozens of times with hundreds of fish, but each fish was like the first one to them. I marveled at this fine example of the dedicated, largely unsung work of the Service that was accomplished daily by our employees, but which I rarely saw from behind my office desk.

The next morning we were on the river at 6:00 a.m. to set the nets out again. The front had passed, and the weather was clear and crisp (some Floridians would say cold). After docking for breakfast, we returned to the river and retrieved two more sturgeon.

This time the fish absolutely glistened as their bronze, iridescent scutes flashed in the sunlight. I began to see the beauty of the beast. Rather than a bony, spiny, prehistoric critter, I was seeing them through Frank’s eyes: an elegant, highly specialized fish that is fighting for survival. I saw “the Sturge” that so excited Frank each time one roiled the water. Yes, I thought, this is the real work of the Service and so much more meaningful than some of those boring or acrimonious meetings I attend in South Florida. Good work, Frank and Bob and Karen and the Panama City staff and the volunteers. “The Sturge” is fortunate to have you in its corner.

Until his recent retirement, Stephen Forsythe was the State Supervisor of the Service’s Ecological Services Field Offices in Florida, located at the South Florida Ecological Services Office in Vero Beach. He began his career with the Service in 1974.

Gulf Sturgeon— Fast Facts

STATUS: Listed as threatened by FWS and NMFS in 1991.

DESCRIPTION: Rows of bony plates (scutes) along body. Averages 6-8 feet (1.8-2.4 m), but can grow longer than 9 feet (2.7 m) and weigh more than 300 pounds (136 kg).

DIET: Bottom dwelling organisms, amphipods, isopods, crustaceans, and marine worms.

HABITAT: Gulf of Mexico, bays and estuaries in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana; major freshwater rivers from the Suwannee River (FL) to Mississippi River.

BREEDING: Anadromous. Migrates from salt water into coastal rivers to spawn in spring. Requires 9-12 years to mature.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL: Former—harvested for edible flesh and eggs (caviar). Current—blocked from spawning grounds by dams and other barriers; habitat loss; poor water quality.

FASCINATING FACTS: Can live to 70 years. Fossil record dates back 200 million years. Can jump out of the water like a mullet.

An 18-minute video, “The Gulf Sturgeon,” illustrating the life history, biology, and recovery efforts is available by calling 1-800-668-9283 (\$15.95). Produced in cooperation with the Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.